DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 136 RC 018 782

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TITLE A Consolidation Success Story.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on Creating the Quality School (Norman, OK, March 30-April 1, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Board of Education Role; *Consolidated Schools; Educational Finance; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; School Closing; *School Community Relationship; School District Reorganization; School Effectiveness; *Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Arkansas (Nevada County)

ABSTRACT

This paper describes school consolidation in six small towns in South Nevada County, Arkansas. None of the six schools had the resources to meet the requirements of advanced programs set by the Arkansas Educational Standards Act. School boards met with each community to gather support for consolidation, discussing increased taxes to pay for a new school building and improved educational programming. To maintain communities' identities, one school facility in each town was left as a community center. Each community elected one board member as a representative for consolidation negotiations. In 1986, a bond referendum was approved to build a school for the new school district. By the fall of 1988, a new school facility was completed, housing an elementary school of 425 students and a high school of 325 students. After 3 years, academic achievement has improved at both the elementary and secondary level. In addition, a wide variety of curricular and extracurricular opportunities are offered to students. There has also been an increase in the number of high school graduates attending college. Consolidation has also allowed savings in utility bills, school lunch and transportation programs, and staffing costs. Consolidation does involve sacrifices such as giving up local schools and losing community identities. Communities also voted to raise their taxes, as much as 55 percent, so their children could receive a better education. (LP)

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A CONSOLIDATION SUCCESS STORY

BY DAVIS BENTON

Consolidation is a subject most small, rural communities approach gingerly, if at all. Citizens have too much emotion invested in the local schoolhouse, the sports teams, and the community's education heritage to do otherwise. That's why many communities only consolidate under duress, and they'll fight bitterly all the way.

But seven years ago, five small towns in South Nevada County, in southwest Arkansas, began to look seriously at their prospects for achieving the goals presented in the then-new Arkansas Educational Standards Act. The goals required our tiny districts to offer courses such as chemistry and advanced mathematics, band and choir, and foreign languages. Schools were required to provide such services as counseling for students.

None of our five school systems each with an enrollment of about 150 students offered more than a smattering of those courses and services, if that. And we had little prospect of offering them in the years to come. At least not on our own, there simply wasn't enough money to go around.

So the school boards of Cale, Oak Grove, Willisville, Bodcaw, and Laneburg began discussing consolidation, cautiously, but with growing conviction that our resources for education were slowly eroding, along with our ability to meet our children's education needs.

Soon we picked up a sixth community, the town of Rosston, which asked to be a part of the planning. Rosston, located in the geographic center of the other five towns, had closed its school in 1955 and sent its students to Prescott, a town more than 20 miles away. Prescott had been allowed to annex Rosston so it could collect taxes to support the schools.

Gathering Support

Those of us on the five school boards knew we had the power to consolidate, but we also knew we would have to go to the citizens to pay for a new school building and the increased taxes that an improved program demanded. And each community had a powerful attachment to its own existing school. In addition, only one of our schools was racially integrated. Emotion and community pride were balanced against the logic of serving children's best interests.

We took the case to each community, often illustrating our arguments with personal history. For example, to illustrate the need for an improved education program, I explained that although I graduated from the local high school, I had to take a year of remedial education

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before I could start college. As a concession to people's fear of losing their identity as a local community, the school boards agreed to leave at least one school facility in each town as a community center.

Finally, the five school boards met and resolved to combine forces to achieve the merger and to include Rosston, which had applied formally to become a part of a consolidated school system. Each community elected one current board member as a representative as negotiations went forward. After talks with Prescott, the town agreed to release Rosston from its commitment, on the promise to pay $75,000 in compensation for future loss of revenue. Rosston joined our new district soon after it was formed.

The next step was to see if the citizens would support us financially. In 1986, the citizens of the six communities answered that question decisively, approving a bond referendum to build a new school for the new district. The vote was 67 percent for, 33 percent against. The consolidation was a reality.

After the state awarded the district an additional $800,000 to aid in the building of the new school, construction began in 1986. By the fall of 1988, we had a new, spacious 90,000 square foot facility, build on the outskirts of Rosston. Under the same roof, we set up an elementary school of 425 students and a high school of 325 students; the two schools are separated by a shared library, gymnasium, and cafeteria.

Signs of Progress

Our consolidation had two overriding goals: to improve the quality of education and to give citizens more value for their taxes. After three years, the signs indicate that we are succeeding.

In the three years before consolidation, 92 percent of third graders passed the Arkansas Minimum Performance Tests in reading and mathematics. In the three years since, 98 percent passed. In the same period, the percentage of sixth graders passing the tests in mathematics, reading, language arts, science, and social studies rose from 88 percent to 98 percent.

That trend continues at the high school level, with annual improvements in scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test and the American College Testing Program (ACT). The average high school dropout rate since consolidation has been only 2.7 percent annually, compared to the state average of 4.2 percent. And so far, we've had only a couple of student expulsions, none for racial incidents.

A more visible sign of success is the wide variety of curricular and extracurricular opportunities students enjoy. Elementary students have

a host of new activities, such as art and art performances, vocal and instrumental music, physical education, clubs, field trips, guest speakers, expanded recreational facilities, and an improved curriculum.

The high school now offers subjects such as foreign languages, chemistry, instrumental music, computer science, computer applications, word processing, and advanced mathematics, biology and English. Other new programs we've added include training in business, journalism, publications, and photography.

Our school has one of the first integrated computer instructional systems in Arkansas. The system, purchased with a combination of federal and state funds, provides learning diagnosis and instruction for kindergarten through adult education. We plan to use it before and after regular school hours, too, as well as for summer school.

And consolidation apparently has helped our students who want to further their education beyond high school. The year before consolidation, a total of 11 students from all five high schools went to college, and all to the same college. That number represents only 20 percent of all graduates. After the first year of consolidation, that figure rose to 41 percent; after the second year, to 61 percent; and after the third year, to 66 percent. Our graduates are now attending seven Arkansas colleges and universities, as well as other colleges farther afield.

As a bonus, the high school has become a power to be reckoned with in regional and even state athletics. To our basketball and track programs, we've added soccer. We might start football, which we never could have contemplated before.

Getting More for Less

The savings to taxpayers have been significant, too. Although our new building is thoroughly air-conditioned, the utility bills are running about 20 percent less than the total utility bills for the five 1930s-era high schools, which have been demolished. Similar savings are evident in the school lunch and transportation programs.

We've saved staffing costs, too, starting by paying a salary to only one superintendent. As a compromise among the five school boards, instead of choosing to keep one of our superintendents, we hired a new one from outside, a specialist in school construction who chose to move on once our new school was built.

Even with an expanded curriculum and services, we were able to reduce our combined staff by 15 teachers; most positions were cut through attrition. At first, the teachers respected old school rivalries and stayed in separate corners of the teacher lounge; now it's hard to

tell which town they're from. At the same time, our employees have enjoyed sizable salary increases that previously would have been impossible.

We did not achieve all these accomplishments without some sacrifices. First and foremost, the people of South Nevada County voted to give up their schools and lose their identity as separate communities. They also voted to raise their taxes - in one of the towns by as much as 55 percent - so their children could receive a better education than they did when they went to school.

Those decisions required commitment and character. But in the years to come, I believe school consolidation in rural, underdeveloped South Nevada County will prove the best investment our citizens could make in their children's future.